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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001615

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, S/CT
NSC FOR E. MILLARD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09-16-13

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [MOPS](#) [PINS](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: Cohabitation dustup over security of key port intensifies as President sends nasty letter to PM

Refs: (A) FBIS Reston Va DTG 140259Z Sep 03

- (B) Colombo 1606, and previous

(U) Classified by Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead.
Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: President Kumaratunga has sent a letter to the prime minister harshly complaining that the GSL is not taking Tamil Tiger military positioning around Trincomalee harbor seriously enough. The PM has not yet sent a response to the widely publicized letter, but the GSL has already denied that Trincomalee is in imminent danger. Most observers believe that there is little merit in the president's charges, but the latest dustup is straining already tense cohabitation ties.
END SUMMARY.

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President's Rocket

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12. (SBU) President Kumaratunga has sent a harsh letter to Prime Minister Wickremesinghe complaining that the GSL is not taking Liberation Tiger of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) military positioning around Trincomalee harbor in the east seriously enough. The letter, which is quite long and detailed, was sent to the prime minister over the September 13-14 weekend and then leaked to the press, receiving widespread publicity in September 16 newspapers. In sending the letter, the president was essentially echoing recent attacks made on the government by members of her People's Alliance (PA) party, including by former foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar. The president made the following key points in the letter:

-- The president stated that the military had determined that the LTTE had established 12 new camps and five temporary camps in the Trincomalee area since the signing of the February 2002 ceasefire accord.

-- The LTTE had also established a new "Sea Tiger" base located just south of Trincomalee harbor, according to the Sri Lankan navy.

-- The genesis of the LTTE's recent attacks on Muslims living in the Trincomalee area revolved around the group's desire to control the Muslim-dominated Mutur area located just south of Trincomalee harbor.

-- The president also quotes from a section of the November 2002 Defense Assessment of the Sri Lankan military by PACOM. The section quoted by the president in her letter essentially states that LTTE military positioning in the vicinity of Trincomalee is strong and that Sri Lankan security forces are having a difficult time securing the area from possible attack.

(Note: The PACOM report was also highlighted in a September 14 article in the SUNDAY TIMES newspaper, which covered many of the same points made by the president in her letter.)

13. (U) Wrapping up, the president caustically informed the PM that she had repeatedly tried to warn him about the developing situation, stating:

"You would agree that I have made numerous attempts in vain to advise you and some of your ministers in the hope of turning the country away from impending disaster. This was done as a final attempt at cohabitational governance. I believe now is the time to inform the people who are my only masters of these facts."

She concludes her letter by requesting several actions from the prime minister, including that he "refrain from concealing and distorting the truth regarding the security situation in Trincomalee" and that he "avoid all further acts of omission and commission that would compromise the security and sovereignty of Sri Lanka."

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GSL says Trincomalee not in Danger

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14. (C) Mission checked with a contact in the PM's office who reported that the prime minister had not yet sent a response to the president's letter. The government has already publicly addressed many of the issues raised in the letter, however. On September 11, for example, G.L. Peiris, the Minister of Enterprise Development and chief government spokesman, stated in his weekly press conference that the situation in the Trincomalee region was not dire in any way. Peiris went on to state the following: "The minister of defense is confident and we want to assure the country that the government can deal with any situation and that the security of the Eastern Province and the coast of Trincomalee is not in danger." Regarding the accusations from the PA, Peiris rejected them out of hand, stating "the government view is that these are spoiler tactics. Such tactics are alarming, destructive, and irresponsible." Peiris also said there had only been one confirmed military camp established by the LTTE in the vicinity of Trincomalee since the ceasefire accord was entered into, not the numerous camps the PA was claiming. (Note: The LTTE has repeatedly refused to vacate this camp despite a ruling by the monitors.)

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President Playing Politics?

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15. (C) Observers that Mission has spoken with believe that there is little merit in the president's charges. Taranjit Sandhu, political counselor at the Indian High Commission, for example, told polchief on September 16 that he thought the president was playing politics in making the charges re Trincomalee and was simply trying to gain an edge over her cohabitation rival, the prime minister. Sandhu added that he thought that the LTTE had long been in a strong position around Trincomalee and, contrary to the president's charges, there was no indication that the group formed more of a threat now than a year ago. Kethesh Loganathan, an analyst at the Center for Policy Alternatives, a local think-tank, told poloff on September 16 that he thought the president was publicly raising the situation around Trincomalee at this time in order to damage the PM's credibility and put him on the defensive.

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COMMENT

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16. (C) The precise military balance of power around Trincomalee is controversial, with views in Sri Lanka strongly colored by attitudes pro or con toward the peace process. The public charges by Kadriamar and the President are based on a briefing given to them by flag-rank naval officers -- indicating that some in the Sri Lankan military may feel that the threat around Trincomalee is serious. Our take is that there is little doubt that the LTTE is in a strong position in the eastern region, as it has been for years. It is even quite probable that the LTTE's overall military position in the east vis-a-vis the Sri Lankan military is better now than before the peace process began in December 2001. That said, it is not clear that the localized situation in Trincomalee has seriously deteriorated in past months as the president specifically asserts. In any case, our guess is that the immediate net impact of the president's letter will probably be to raise cohabitation tensions -- which are already high -- another notch. END COMMENT.

17. (U) Minimize considered.
LUNSTEAD